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OMISSION OF THE CENTRAL ACTION IN ENGLISH BALLADS

In order to treat of the central action, which involves what is perhaps most vital in the method of the ballads, a theory of ballad origins is necessary; for unless we have some notion as to who wrote the ballads, we cannot be sure why they were written just as they are.

Let us confess at the outset that the distinction between "true" ballads and "made" ones seems to us misleading; that all ballads seem to be made, some well and some badly, some in conformity with the principles which underlie the type to which they belong and others in imitation of these original ballads. Setting aside the riddle ballads, and one or two survivals of a very early choral dance, we may say that ballads are the products of individuals, and that these individuals belong to schools—not the schools whose names appear in literary history, but anonymous schools of expression.

When we have an anonymous poem in literature, it can usually be associated with the writings which characterize some well-known school, and may be classed as an "anonymous Elizabethan sonnet," an "anonymous Cavalier song," or the like. But in the case of the ballads, not only the author is unknown, but the school itself is, and in most cases always has been, an anonymous one. The literary historians have somehow overlooked it, and we find, virtually, its only record in the stanzas which it has left us.

We see something of the same sort today, even now that the personal element is everywhere so pronounced. Who writes the articles in a metropolitan newspaper? How many people know or care about the composer when they whistle an air from the music-halls? Who makes the jokes of the day which are passed from mouth to mouth? Of course, the parallel should not be carried too far; the newspaper, at least, is conscious and purposive, the ballads were unconscious and without definite purpose. Just what is meant by this distinction? I cannot illustrate better than by recalling the familiar story of Sheridan, the playwright-orator, and the countryman. While passing along an English road, Sheridan met the

countryman and asked what he thought of the new peace with France. The latter replied, in substance: "It is a peace of which we may all be glad, but of which no one can be proud." Sheridan used the epigram at a critical time in Parliament, and electrified that assembly and through it the whole nation. In this case, the countryman spoke unconsciously and without definite purpose the same words which Sheridan, consciously and purposively, used to express the feelings of his fellow-citizens.

It is quite natural for distinct types of art to observe canons of their own. Who desires or expects to find in the newspaper the personal style of Macaulay? I once had pointed out to me an article by one of the most brilliant of the younger newspaper men in America, and was told that it was his masterpiece. It seemed childishly simple, but I could perceive in it a quality which gave it significance. There was no personality in it, little of what we often call style; but its effectiveness was due to an anonymous, unindividualized appeal to the sympathies of men. In this sense, the editorial "we" becomes really significant: and some American newspapers lack the subjective point of view as completely as the ballads.

But as the ballads were made at a comparatively early period, when an education in letters was the rare exception, and when the restraint of literary canons did not bind the anonymous muse, it was natural that very great differences existed between the respective literatures of the coffee-house and the farmhouse. Though a false rhyme is now almost intolerable in English poetry, rhyme is such an incidental feature of the ballads that we soon become used to irregularities, and are jarred only when the words are coupled in an especially harsh fashion, or when the words which are singled out for emphasis are incapable of sustaining it. Though imagery is a prime consideration in modern poetry, we soon learn not to expect much of it in the ballads. The customary quatrain stanza, which would be a fetter to Shelley, is accepted here as the natural thing, and we feel, in many cases, that its very simplicity gives it tremendous force.

This existence of a considerable body of anonymous poetry may be understood better by a comparison. Suppose all the work of the Romantic school were to be lost to literary history (a large suppo-

sition, but one which may serve for illustration), and then were to be rediscovered some centuries hence, surviving anonymously in a somewhat mutilated condition in the mouths of the people. In that case, as in this, new canons of criticism would have to be formulated; and, in order to arrive at a fair evaluation of the poems and a discriminating judgment of them, we should have to select the most vigorous of the versions, discarding as far as possible the dross which a few centuries of forgetfulness, imitation, and bad taste would have given birth to. As before, however, the parallel doesn't extend far; we are reminded that the ballads have not drifted into the mouths of the commoners by accident, and that they are anonymous by nature. We have not merely an anonymous school of poetry; it is a school of anonymous poetry.

Furthermore, the case of the ballads is more complex. We have not one school of narrative poetry, but four. There is also a group, that of flyting, in which the theme is not even of a narrative nature. Why have these different ballad schools become confused? Do they represent different and successive stages of artistic development, as Professor W. M. Hart¹ concludes; or have they been thrown together rather indiscriminately, merely because they were found mostly in oral currency, and are they generally independent of any recognized literary school? The first position I shall undertake to prove untenable, somewhat hereafter; and the second position, which I maintain, will have to be modified somewhat before it will be worthy of acceptance.

There are some ballads in the Child collection² which are not of anonymous origin, or which are anonymous only in part,³ most of them being broadsides, the work of public hack-writers. As for this problem, two solutions offer themselves. Perhaps Professor Child made a slip in admitting them into the collection; or perhaps, because they deal with kindred subjects, they have been drawn in by the attraction of the undoubted anonymous ones. In any case, they belong to a different school, anonymous only in part, a school which should be kept distinct from the purely anonymous one.

¹ *Ballad and Epic; a Study in the Development of the Narrative Art*, Boston, 1907.

² Cf. No. 154, in *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. So in all cases where numbers are cited.

³ Buchan's version of No. 94.

Except in cases where a broadside imitates an existing ballad or where a ballad springs from a broadside, there is always a marked difference in the productions of the two schools. In general I shall slight the broadsides, and shall make but glancing reference to them in this discussion; for they do not illustrate any of my points except by contrast.

It is apparent, even to the listless reader of English and Scottish ballads, that they fall into several well-defined groups. Professor Hart classifies¹ them into four main divisions: (1) Simple Ballads; (2) Border and Outlaw Ballads, including (a) Border Ballads, (b) the Robin Hood Cycle, and (c) "Adam Bell"; (3) the "Gest"; and (4) Heroic Ballads, more common in the literature of some other countries. The classification is good as far as it goes; but I wish to provide for a few exceptions. The Riddle Ballads, such as Nos. 1, 2, and 3, and probable survivals of the dance-dialogues, such as No. 95, are not essentially narrative; the story, as far as any exists, serves merely to furnish a background for the dialogue. Perhaps also the comic tendencies of some of the later ballads justify putting them in a separate class; for the earlier ballads are mostly tragic, and deal not with a mere anecdote but with a story of real significance. Even after limiting ourselves to the simple ballads, we have still something like four rather distinct types to deal with: the perfect simple ballads, the fragmentary simple ballads, the Buchan versions, and the broadsides.

In many of the fragments, the story has been lost so completely that only a name or two serves to associate these fragments with the complete ballads. In such cases, there is a marked tendency for these chips to lose the chief characteristics of the old block, and to become lyrical in character. It is the story which seems to drop out first; it is the situation, with the lyrical comment upon it, which remains. This is a point which directly controverts the theory of Professor Hart, and one which he seems to have overlooked.

The narrative qualities of the broadside have been mentioned before. Let me repeat here that except in those cases where they were but reworkings of existing poetry of the anonymous school, the broadsides were innocent of every one of the artistic devices

¹ *Ballad and Epic*, p. 4.

which characterized the best ballads. There is an almost invariable tendency to subordinate the story to an ulterior consideration by appending a sort of moral. If the morals were good, such supplements would still detract from the narrative power of the poems; but in almost every case the conclusion is either irrelevant or is so feebly and insincerely phrased that it is painful.

But the worst productions of the broadside school are not to be compared with the offerings of Buchan. Sometimes Motherwell is just as bad an offender, but in many of these cases he seems to have been led astray by bad company.¹ I have collected statistics (omitted here for brevity's sake) which show that Buchan's ballads are the longest, the fullest, and seemingly the most carefully padded of any; and a little reading should also convince anyone that they are also the worst. Is there a fundamental connection between this fulness and the coexistent badness of these productions? Professor Child seems to imply² that there is, when he states that "the silliness and fulsome vulgarity of Buchan's ballads often enough make one wince or sicken, and many of them came through bad mouths and bad hands: we have even positive proof in one instance of imposture." In another place³ his opinion is even more unmistakable: "Buchan, who may be relied upon to produce a longer ballad than anybody else, has 'Young Waters' in thirty-nine stanzas, 'the only complete version he had ever met with.' Of the copy I will only say that everything which is not in the edition of 1755 (itself a little the worse for editing) is a counterfeit of the lowest description. Nevertheless it is given in the appendix; for much the same reason that thieves are photographed."

Returning to Professor Hart's classification,⁴ it is noticeable that there is here not only a difference of technique but also a difference of subject-matter. The simple ballads are concerned almost solely with the relations between men and women; in the vast majority of cases the story deals with the domestic relation. Even in "Sir Patrick Spens,"⁵ where it would seem that women could be excluded entirely, we find the mention of them more persistent than any other part of the ballad. The skipper may be Sir Patrick

¹ Nos. 96, C; 110, E.

² *Ibid.*, II, 110.

³ II, 342.

⁴ *Supra*, p. 4.

⁵ No. 58.

or Sir Andrew, but the ladies remain. This is in sharp contrast with the border and outlaw ballads, where some one vigorous action is the center of interest; or the "Gest," where the life-history of a hero is to be considered; or the heroic ballads, which treat of the heroic exploit, or a series of exploits. This difference of subject-matter alone is so complete as to serve in itself to distinguish the school of the simple ballads from the other three. We have here our single school of romantic anonymous poetry, and our threefold school of the poetry of heroic adventure.¹

There are equally striking differences of technique, among which may be mentioned those of diction, of characterization (as far as any exists), and, in many cases, of the movement of the verse; but it is with the differences of the narrative method that we are primarily concerned. In many of the best and most characteristic of the simple ballads, the central action or central motive is omitted entirely, or else is withheld to furnish a climax at the end. Sometimes this suspense exists only for the characters in the story, but more often and more effectively it exists for readers and actors alike. There is also little effort on the part of the balladist to attribute speeches to the characters who utter them, or to supply transitions in the story.² Leaping, broken narration is characteristic, rather than exceptional. In each of the other types the contrary is true. The story proceeds smoothly, especially in the "Gest"; there is no omission of the central action; and suspense, when it does exist, is incidental rather than fundamental. There is no effort to select a striking situation and linger upon it, but rather the action begins at the beginning of things and proceeds in an orderly fashion to the end.

Professor Hart concludes, for these and similar reasons, that the simple ballads, which were last to receive public notice, nevertheless represent an earlier stage in the process of development; and that the longer and more developed forms (i.e., the border and outlaw ballads, the "Gest," and the heroic ballads) represent a higher form of narrative art, and a later period of ballad evolution.

¹ The ballads of Christian and knightly legend are not classified here, because it seems to me that they do not belong within the scope of this discussion.

² *The Popular Ballad*, pp. 91, 117.

This view is acknowledged to be startling, and it seems to me to be equally false.

I shall quote from his own conclusion:

As a result, now, of the poet's increasingly exclusive possession of the material, of his disinclination to limit himself to matters of common knowledge, with his increasingly rational method, elaboration comes more and more to take the place of the peculiar omission and suggestion of the simple ballad . . . this elaboration, combined with the tendency to unite two or more stories into a single whole, necessitates a greater length, and greater and greater demands are made upon the poet's architectural power. It is easy for the simple ballad, with its love of symmetry and repetition, to achieve, within its narrow limits, a remarkable perfection of structure; the compiler of the *Gest*, striving to unite a series of independent incidents, solves a more difficult problem.¹

Is it not an evidence of bad art, rather than of advanced development, that the compiler of the "Gest" undertakes to put together so much unrelated material? If the smooth linking of unrelated facts were the supreme test, then the chronicles and historical plays would be among the most artistic productions in the language. Some of our elder poets attempted to write histories of the world in verse, "striving to unite a series of independent incidents," and certainly contending with a "difficult problem"; but do we rank these writings as high art? Is there any underlying unity in these rambling narratives which would justify one in calling them epics, in the sense that the *Iliad* is an epic? Or even granting the use of the term, is not the epic, historically, a rather primitive form of literature, giving way in later times to shorter and more perfect forms? With slight modification, we may read Macaulay's words: "As civilization advances, *epic* poetry almost necessarily declines." On the contrary, the simple ballad, with its selection of details, with its deliberately chosen situation, with its antecedent action implied or but slightly expressed, with its resultant action in many cases merely foreshadowed, with its powerful suspense, is in close conformity with the principles which underlie the modern short-story, the most highly developed form of the narrative art. It is strange that Professor Hart, who has made a special study of the short-story, should have overlooked the resemblance. If the principles

¹ *Ballad and Epic*, p. 310.

which he lays down for the ballads be brought over and applied to prose narration, then we must conclude that greater demands were made upon the authors in the rambling narratives of former times than in a story like *The Necklace* of De Maupassant. For in the first instance, we have Professor Hart's series of "independent incidents"; in the second, we have a few carefully chosen and closely related ones. In the first case, there is a commendable effort to tell everything that happened; in the second, there is a deliberate and exclusive choice of two situations for emphatic treatment. In the first instance, we have the story told in chronological order; in the second, we have complete suspense of the central point of interest, which fact is not even hinted at until the last sentence. There is another striking resemblance between the simple ballad and the short-story. In both cases the central action is not only suspended to the close, but is often projected on beyond it.

The simple ballads show another tendency, mentioned previously in another connection,¹ which indicates that they are of a late period of development. They have a marked tendency to dwell on the mood of the principal actor, and upon the situation, in many cases to the detriment or loss of the narrative aspect. The second part of "Fair Helen," which is in Scott's *Minstrelsy*, though not in Professor Child's collection, is so intent upon the lyrical phase of the situation, regardless of past and future action, that it ceases to be a narrative and passes over into the realm of lyric poetry; and even "Sir Patrick Spens," perhaps the most perfect and at the same time the most typical of the best simple ballads, is not far removed from *The Three Fishers* of Charles Kingsley. It is a well-known fact, attested by the literary history of every nation, that the intense lyric is one of the latest poetic forms to develop, as more purely narrative types are among the earliest of all. It might be argued that the more direct narration of the *Odyssey* is a later development than the leaping and seemingly unrelated narration of Pindar; but history speaks louder than speculation. It seems, then, that though the "Gest" may represent a relatively high development of its type in narrative art, the kind itself is an early one historically and a crude one artistically; whereas, when we make due allowances

¹ *Supra*, p. 5.

for the peculiarities of style which now seem strange to us because they are characteristic of a lost school, the simple ballads are found to be in conformity with the principles which underlie the most highly developed form of the narrative art, and show in addition that leaning toward the lyric which is characteristic of the most intense poetry which deals with a single situation.

Having now outlined our general theory of the ballad, let us come to a consideration of the particular instances in which this suppression of the central action occurs. Restricting ourselves to the better ones of the simple ballads—for it is only here that the device is employed to any considerable extent—we find that, as in the case of all schools, some of the poets used the approved methods with effect, others bungled them, and still others failed to make any use of the most powerful of all ballad devices—the omission of the central action, including the kindred device of suspense.

There are four main divisions of the examples of omission and suspense: minor omissions, suspense, omission of the central motive, and omission of the central action. The term “minor omissions” includes not only the leaving-out of connecting passages of various sorts—natural enough in narration of a leaping type—but also the omission of details which are subordinated for artistic purpose. In “Brown Adam” (No. 98, A) we are told simply that—

He's gard him leave his bow, his bow,
He's gard him leave his bran;
He's gard him leave a better pledge,
Four fingers o' his right han.

The fight has been passed over here, because we are concerned only with the results of it. This is in sharp contrast with the border and outlaw ballads, where the fight's the thing, and with less artistic examples of the simple ballads, where the details of a fight are allowed to assume undue prominence in the story. There is also a tendency to pass over the act of death, and even when the death is over, to make only glancing reference to it. This is in direct opposition to the love of detail of Buchan's versions and the broadsides, but it is nevertheless very common. Sometimes this description seems to have been lost¹, but in other cases² the omission is

¹ No. 92, C, D, E, etc.

² Nos. 64, A; 67, A; 69, B.

intentional. The clerk of Owsenford, instead of telling his wife that the two sons are dead, says:

I've putten them to a deeper lair,
An to a higher school.

Not only is the news of the death withheld, but in many cases the death itself is left to be inferred. In "Fair Janet" (64, A) Willie gives parting instructions and then is buried. In "Glasgerion" (67, A) the hero prepares to slay himself, and then we leap to a reflection on the whole tragedy. In "Lady Alice" (85, B) the lady predicts her death, and then is buried. In "Lamkin" (93) some of the versions are so fragmentary as to omit all account of the killing, which is here the central action. Is this omission a stronger device than detailed narration would afford? Obviously it is. The only objection to the method is that it may make the story too vague and obscure if carried to an excess.

Our second division, suspense, covers a much greater field, including four principal varieties. These are as follows: suspense for one or more of the characters, but not for the reader; suspense of a single detail of the story; suspense of the general significance of the story; and suspense of the identity of the principal character. The last two divisions overlap, but they may be considered separately to advantage. In "The Bailiff's Daughter of Islington" (105) it is quite clear to us that the girl is in disguise, but the apprentice is made to think she is dead. It is well to note that the only version of this is a broadside, and that the conclusion is spoiled by the unnecessary stanza:

O farewel grief, and welcome joy,
Ten thousand times and more!
For now I have seen my own true-love,
That I thought I should have seen no more.

In "The Gay Goshawk" (96, A) the suspense for the father and brothers is pretty effective: and the disillusionment of the lady in "Old Robin of Portingale" (80) is really powerful:

Upp then went that ladie light,
With torches burning bright;
She thought to have brought Sir Gyles a drinke,
But she found her own wedd knight.

And the first thing that this ladye stumbled upon
 Was of Sir Gyles his ffoote;
 Sayes, "Euer alacke, and woe is me,
 Here lies my sweete heart-roote!"

But perhaps the most successful suspense for one or more of the characters is to be found in "Clerk Saunders" (69, A), where, after a definite statement for the reader that Saunders is slain, the poem continues in this fashion, lingering not upon the mere details but upon the poetic quality of the tragedy:

And they lay still, and slepted sound,
 Untill the day began to daw;
 And kindly till him did she say
 "It's time, trew-love, ye were awa."

Suspense of a single detail is generally employed for the purpose of adornment, or what seems to have been considered ornamental. In one form or another, it is found almost universally in the simple ballads. It is generally of a conventional type of elaboration, which Professor Gummere calls incremental repetition.¹ In this sort of suspense, the balladist, or one of the characters, mentions two or more rather irrelevant things, and then comes suddenly to the point with a swoop like that with which a hawk descends upon chickens. The device is frequently used for padding, especially in the hands of Buchan; but sometimes it is really effective, as in the famous stanza from "Little Musgrave and Lady Barnard" (81, A):

Methinks I hear the thresel-cock,
 Methinks I hear the jaye;
 Methinks I hear my Lord Barnard,
 And I would I were away.

Suspense of identity is used for a variety of purposes. In "The Knight and the Shepherd's Daughter" (110) and "The Beggar Laddie" (280) it serves to give piquancy to rather scurrilous tales which are not entirely redeemed by attempts at romantic conclusions. In "Willie and Earl Richard's Daughter" (102, A) the secret that the child is Robin Hood is withheld until the end; but in the Buchan version (102, B) the principal point of interest is exposed in the first stanza, with the infallible instinct of a peddler. In "Fair

¹ *The Popular Ballad*, p. 42.

Annie" (62) and "The Lass of Roch Royal" (76) the whole story hangs upon the concealment of the identity of Fair Annie, in the first case, and of the mother in the second; and yet we observe that in most versions the identity of Annie is hinted at as soon as the bride arrives, and in the latter case the imposture is detected long before the story closes. In "Child Maurice" (83, A) we find perhaps the most effective use of suspense which occurs anywhere in the ballads; here the relationship of mother and son is not only the keynote of everything in the whole ballad, but it is withheld perfectly until near the end, to be uttered in a marvelous stanza:

But when shee looked on Child Maurice head,
 Shee neuer spake words but three:
 "I neuer beare no child but one,
 And you haue slaine him trulye."

In the next two stanzas we are told that she is dead. Could a more perfect bit of narrative art be imagined? In some of the poorer versions of this ballad (83, B, C, F) the secret is given away by Child Maurice before the climax. By comparing these versions with that of the Percy MS, we are made to realize that the narrative of suspense surpasses straight narration in the "architectural power" mentioned by Professor Hart.

It will be noticed that in the preceding instances, the significance of the whole story rested upon the suspense of identity; but there are other cases in which suspense of the former exists independently. In one version of "Young Benjie" (86, B) the story is not begun until the brothers are searching for the drowned body of Maisry, and considerable antecedent action makes more or less suspense necessary. In "Lord Randal" (12) the suspense is an integral part of the ballad; and in "Edward" (13, B) this is coupled with unusual felicity of phrase, and dramatic interest of situation.

Omission of the central motive is rare, except in fragments, and it is safe to suppose that it is due in any case either to loss of explanatory stanzas or to artistic suppression. In some versions of "Lamkin" (93, D, E, G) the first stanzas, telling of the original quarrel, have almost certainly been lost by accident. In some cases the result of this is to make a sort of bugbear of Lamkin, to frighten children, and the tragedy of the lord's injustice to the mason and the terrible

revenge which followed is quite gone. There can be no doubt that in this instance, and in many similar ones, where the character of the story is changed, the omission of the central motive is a source of weakness. In the case of the seemingly intentional omission of the motive, such as that in "Young Johnstone" (86), the device is an element of strength. Though it confuses us to some extent, the mystery of the unexplained killing gives an added emotional appeal. The lady's dying question is made more pathetic by Johnstone's evasion of it.

We come now to the last of our four divisions, omission of the central action. In this, as in the preceding, we find instances due to accidental and others to artistic suppression. In one version of "Lamkin" (93, Q) we have all the important action lost; in one version of "Johnie Scot" (99, M) the same is true. In the last version of "Glasgerion" (67, C) the poem does not become a fragment, but instead the omission serves in a way to increase the effectiveness of the whole. In "The Wife of Usher's Well" (79, A) there is a suggestion in the last stanza that may be taken to indicate that either the central action or the central motive for action has been omitted, though it may mean nothing more than a pathetic farewell to the recollections of childhood:

Fare ye weel, my mother dear!
 Fareweel to barn and byre!
 And fare ye weel, the bonny lass
 That kindles my mother's fire!

This omission, if omission it is, throws the whole story in doubt, but it makes a better poem of the ballad. But the best illustration of artistic omission occurs in "Sir Patrick Spens" (56, A, a). This is perhaps the shortest of all the very great ballads, only eleven stanzas; and the swiftness of its catastrophe, its certainty, its power—this is no less notable than the method by which it is obtained. It takes us but two lines to get well into the scene of action; in the last line of the stanza we have an indication of the drift of the story; in the following stanza the hero is introduced; and by the seventh, we finish with the forebodings, and are ready for the four final stanzas of regretful contemplation. Of action expressed there is little; this is scarcely a narrative at all, but rather it is one of those

ballads that are so intense as to become fused into a lyrical quality. This is the sort of thing that Professor Hart seems to consider inferior, more primitive, a lower form of art than the jog-trot doggerel of the Robin Hood cycle. The full force of the method employed in the A version can best be appreciated by comparing it with that of the *Minstrelsy* (56, H). The latter is much longer, is told in straight narrative order, and is vigorous to a high degree; but we miss the irresistible imaginative suggestiveness of the A version. However, if this lyrical quality be allowed to predominate too far; if, as in "The Twa Corbies" (26) or "Fair Helen,"¹ we leave out the normal beginning which clings to "Sir Patrick Spens" and serves to give it a semi-narrative character; and if we begin frankly at the end, as both of the former poems do, then we have a lyrical poem pure and simple. It is notable that Palgrave includes "The Twa Corbies" and "Fair Helen" in his matchless little anthology of English lyrics but does not take in "Sir Patrick Spens."

Let us pause now to recapitulate and summarize:

1. Ballads may be told in straight narrative fashion and yet be very effective, as "Child Waters" (62, A). Here the intrinsic strength of the plot, the simple majesty of the diction, and the climactic arrangement of the details serve to make the ballad effective. But if the plot were less significant, or if the tone of the whole were not so well maintained, there would be nothing in it to make for strength.

2. Minor omissions occur in almost all of the ballads, and are used for euphemism in mentioning unpleasant occurrences or for subordination in dealing with matters of varying degrees of importance. Such omissions not only economize time, but they also make a greater or less appeal to the imagination of the reader, or hearer, perhaps I should say.

3. Suspense is of several degrees and varieties. To some extent it is found in almost all of the ballads; for in any narrative a limited degree of it is almost unavoidable. But the artistic use of suspense is a means of securing unusual power, and it occurs for the most part only in the best ballads. It is found chiefly in one of two phases: suspense of a single detail, suspense which exists for one or more of

¹ *Supra.*, p. 8.

the characters but not for the reader, and suspense of the general significance of the story, which frequently appears in the special phase of the suspense of the identity of the principal character. The finest example is that of "Child Maurice,"¹ where by the sudden revelation of the key fact of the story, we are obliged to reconstruct our conception of the whole, at the moment of greatest intensity. In this connection it will be noted that those of the versions that fail to employ suspense or omission are infinitely weaker than those that make use of them.

4. Suppression of the central motive is rare, and if badly handled it results in obscurity. It exists principally in fragments, and is there apparently accidental; though even in those cases, the fact that the motive drops out may be significant.

5. Complete suppression of the central action, except in fragments, is rare, and is due to consummate art; consequently it is not to be found in the ballads of heroic adventure, nor in the independent broadsides, nor in the worse sort of simple ballads. Most of even the best simple ballads do not omit the central action. Complete omission by its very nature is essential and structural, and determines the character of the ballad; whereas suspense is generally subordinate and decorative. But the examples of complete suspense are much more numerous than those of omission, and fall into three classes: suspense for wit flavored with a low sort of romance, as in "The Beggar Laddie" (280) and "The Knight and the Shepherd's Daughter" (110); suspense for a romantic conclusion, as in "Bonnie Lizie Baillie" (227) and "Glasgow Peggie" (228); and suspense for tragedy, as in "Child Maurice" and "Edward." There is a marked difference between these two last. In "Child Maurice" the suspense of a fact leads to a tragedy; in "Edward," the action has already occurred, and we are simply told of it in the most effective way. Complete suspense, then, is to be considered a more frequently used and more typical device than omission of the central action, and it is more nearly in conformity with the methods of modern narrative art.

6. Omission of the central action requires more or less deviation from the normal path of the simple ballad, and presupposes on the

¹ *Supra*, p. 12.

part of its author at least a limited degree of the highest poetic art. It presupposes, also, no small degree of appreciation on the part of those who perpetuate it by oral transmission. The intense suppression of those details on which the unlettered mind loves to linger does not find ready recognition among such people as the milkmaids and female servants and very old men who furnished so many of the ballad versions; and if Buchan's collector had met with such a monstrosity, he would no doubt have hastened to fill in the vacancy. There is more reason than is at first apparent why the best versions of "Edward" and "Sir Patrick Spens" occur only in the *Reliques* of the cultivated Thomas Percy. The suspense of the former would be a little beyond the ordinary mind (though "Lord Randal," with its excess of detail and contagious refrain, has remained very popular despite the suspense employed); and as for the latter, what village gossip would be content to sing the fate of Sir Patrick in eleven stanzas, omitting all mention of the rebellious cabin boy and the floating mattresses, when she might just as easily, and with much greater satisfaction, retain all those delectable details and spin the yarn out to a decent length?

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